

How high potential coaching can add value – for participants and the organisation

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Abstract

This case study explores the value of high potential coaching as part of a leadership development programme. As empirical and participant-based research for coaching (effectiveness) in a talent management context is scarce, both participant and organisation perspectives were explored.

This research shows that the coaching readiness of participants could be influenced, both by the organisation and the relationship with the coach. The findings show that both the organisation and the participants valued personal realisations, increased effectiveness and career moves, although emphasised different elements. Findings could be relevant for coaching in a talent management context or for when engagement in coaching is not voluntary.

Key words: high potential coaching, talent management, client readiness, leadership development, success factors

Introduction

Technical development, globalisation and increasingly demanding markets have great impact on what is demanded from today's leaders. As a result, attracting, developing and retaining talents are top priorities for companies today (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis and Hackman, 2006). Many organisations have implemented dedicated programmes in order to assess, challenge, and develop their talents.

However, the efficacy of such programmes is being contested (CIPD, 2015) and very few (empirical) effectiveness studies on talent management can be found (Gallardo-Gallardo and Thunnissen, 2016). Literature on talent management is normative or prescriptive in tone and research is almost entirely done from an organisation's perspective (Dries and Pepermans, 2007). Nonetheless, it is implicitly assumed that participants' views are aligned with those of the organisation, which, according to Thunnissen *et al.* (2013a), is not always the case. Literature on the effectiveness of talent management thus shows a clear lack of empirical and participant-based research.

A commonly applied intervention in talent development programmes is coaching (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Bond and Naughton, 2011). Over the last decade, coaching has advanced from being an intervention exclusively for senior leaders to a more widespread intervention across the organisation. However, there is very little research that considers coaching in a talent management context. Most research is done on 'executive coaching' populations, in which it is generally noted that coaching is effective (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Executive coaching research has therefore shifted towards the exploration of moderators



that make coaching effective, such as the coach-client relationship, client personality and the client's readiness to be coached (de Haan *et al.*, 2016; Jones *et al.*, 2016).

Although there is some overlap with executive coaching, high potential coaching is viewed as distinct from executive coaching (Rose, 2015). High potentials, often organised in a talent pool, have different organisational roles and challenges than executives. Additionally, coaching for high potentials is often offered as part of a leadership development programme, where high potentials do not always consciously choose to be coached. Where the evidence for the effectiveness for executive coaching is growing, little material is available on the effectiveness of high potential coaching, let alone from a participant perspective or to what extent the participant and organisation perspectives are aligned.

Understanding how high potentials value coaching and exploring if and how their experiences align with the organisation's perspective is crucial for organisations when designing programmes to develop and retain their high potentials. This study contributes to expanding this understanding by researching high potential coaching in a multinational manufacturing organisation. Besides understanding the participant perspective and how that is aligned with the organisation, this study explores, in cases where coaching was perceived as successful, what factors participants identified as contributing to its success.

The following section reviews some of the literature that informed the study, which is followed by a description of the research methodology. Findings are then presented and discussed in relation to existing literature. The paper concludes with implications of the findings for theory and practice, and suggestions for future research.

Methodology

The main intention of this study is to understand what high potentials are aspiring to achieve through coaching and how that aligns with the organisation's aims. Thus, an exploratory, qualitative methodology was called for. A case study was identified as most appropriate approach, as it allowed for a retrospective and deductive design (Yin, 2009). Additionally, it provided the opportunity to compare participants' perspectives with the organisation, allowing for multiple ways to collect data (Grant, 2013).

The study was conducted in an international manufacturing organisation based in the Netherlands. The organisation identifies high potentials based on past and current performance combined with indicative future potential. It recognises three groups of high potentials based on seniority. This study focuses on the most senior group of high potentials that are on the verge of growing into executive roles. Their individual coaching was embedded in a talent development programme that lasted 13 months and consisted of different developmental activities, such as an assessment centre, group modules on leadership and business strategy, peer coaching and a business challenge. The individual coaching is the principal focus of this study.

Participants

All eligible 35 individuals of the senior high potential cohort were invited to take part in this study. Eight people responded to the invitation and they were all invited for an interview (seven men and one woman). To understand the organisation's perspective for commissioning the coaching programme, two (HR) managers, who were involved in the design of the programme, were interviewed. All names are replaced with gender-neutral names to ensure anonymity of all participants.

Data collection

Interviews were held face-to-face, in confidential surroundings and were audio recorded with informed consent of the participants. A balance was chosen between obtaining specific information to achieve the research objectives, and a natural participant-led account that would yield the much-desired 'rich data' in qualitative research. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were held (Alvesson and Lee Ashcraft, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

In addition to the interviews, documents containing information on the talent development programme, including the coaching programme, were reviewed. Information included the identification and selection of high potentials, the format of the programmes and the organisation's objectives for the coaching programme.

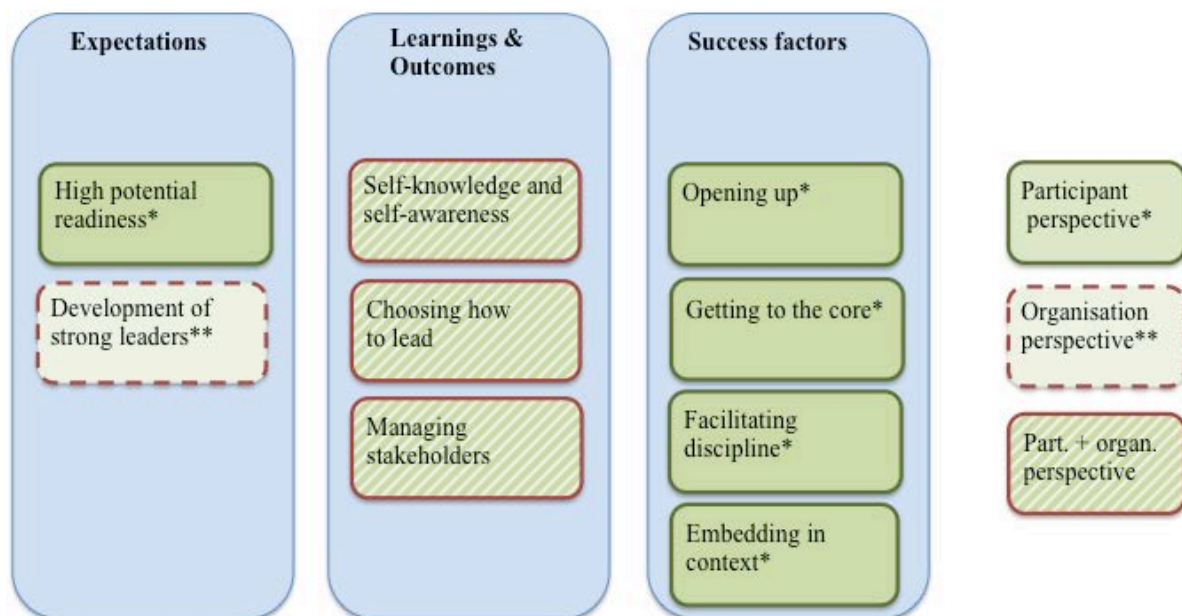
Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed. In transcribing, no correction was made to incorrect English of the non-native English-speaking participants, not to influence the raw data. Thematic analysis was used as a process to encode the transcribed interviews and analyse the data (Boyatzis, 1998), as it allows for exploration of patterns and key elements both within an interview and across the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Three themes emerged from the thematic analysis, of which both the participants' and the organisation's perspective will be presented, see Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Overarching themes in relation to the added value of high potential coaching



Expectations

Both participants and organisational representatives were asked about their expectations prior to starting coaching. A common theme from participants was their reluctance to take part in this non-voluntary coaching initiative. Although they felt honoured to be selected for

the talent development programme, most of them did not feel ready to be coached. The attitude of the majority of participants varied from a 'wait and see' stance to a more worried and sceptical outlook. For some this was due to its mandatory character. Others had reservations on the background of the coach or had unhelpful previous coaching experiences. Charlie, for example, voiced his expectations of coaching as:

I would not say [it was] 'necessary evil'. The coaching part was 'ok, that is also part of this development thing', I am in it for the other stuff.

Participants' reservations towards coaching may not be surprising when relating coaching to the field of adult learning and development (Cox *et al.*, 2014). One of the principles of Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning is that adults are open to learn when they experience a need to learn, which was lacking for many participants prior to coaching.

The perspective of the organisational representatives encompassed the organisation's vision on coaching and development of talents. Development of strong leaders was recognised as the most important reason for the organisation to commission this coaching programme. As the organisation was growing exponentially, with many executives retiring, new leaders were needed to fill both existing and new leadership positions. Additionally, high potentials in this organisation were highly trained on the content of their jobs, but were effectively missing other skills. Coaching was expected to "equip new leaders with capabilities to do that succession in a good way" (Julian). Coaching was their intervention of choice because it allows for tailoring to personal development goals, as Julian describes:

So I think it's a more tailor-made part of the programme where it is about you, what drives you and why YOU are successful or what is preventing you from taking charge of certain things. Where a more personal approach, I think, helps, rather than a kind of classroom approach.

A comparison between the expectations of the participants and organisation reveals a difference in character of the accounts. Participants took a more phenomenological stance. For most of them coaching was not a deliberate choice, which triggered (some) resistance. The organisation's accounts reflected its view on coaching, considering it as an opportunity to develop as 'strong leader', which was not the expectation of most participants.

Coaching experts clearly indicate that the client's intention and readiness are crucial to coaching success (Bachkirova, 2011; Cox *et al.*, 2014). Not surprisingly, non-voluntary coaching proved to be a difficult starting point for many of the participants. It is therefore interesting to next explore how participants experienced their coaching and what they viewed as the outcomes.

Learnings and outcomes

When participants were prompted to comment on their actual coaching experience and learnings from it, they generally indicated they were positive about their coaching experience. Likewise, organisational representatives were positive based on their personal experience and on conversations with high potential participants rather than on formal evaluations of the coaching programme. Three subthemes emerged from the interviews: 1. Increased self-knowledge and self-awareness, 2. Choosing how to lead and 3. Managing stakeholders. Analysing the participants' and the organisation's accounts in terms of outcome thus resulted in a similar set of subthemes:

1. Increased self-knowledge and self-awareness

Key factors for participants that facilitated the increase of their self-awareness and self-knowledge were the insights they gained in their strengths and capabilities, in their growth

limiting beliefs and in their impact on others. This is in accordance with findings of other coaching outcome studies (Bachkirova *et al.*, 2015, Joo, 2015; CIPD, 2010). Bachkirova *et al.* (2015), for example, showed that clients reported an increase in engagement, self-efficacy and self-compassion, as a result of coaching.

Beliefs on personal leadership and growth revealed in coaching, gave for some insights in their fears. For others it involved learning about different ways of adding value in the organisation:

By better understanding your limitations, you are also more comfortable about yourself being, knowing that not in every meeting or situation you can always contribute a lot. (Sam)

Gaining insight and understanding of their personal beliefs facilitated participants to think differently about themselves, their strengths and their careers. Some experienced a boost in self-confidence as a result, which for some was an encouragement to change jobs within the company. These so-called cross-sectional career moves were regarded as a very important outcome for the organisation. Moving leaders around the organisation were seen as an opportunity to stimulate collaboration between the currently 'silo-ed' sectors and thus provide an opportunity for high potentials to show their talents in a different environment.

2. Choosing how to lead

Related to the second subtheme, all participants mentioned an increase in their leadership skills, resulting from the coaching programme. With these gained leadership skills they could more consciously choose how to lead and were able to adjust their style to the situation or individual. Some learned to build relationships to accomplish sustainable results whereas others learned to guide people rather than lead them and, as Sam illustrated:

You need to share your purpose, your goal, what you need and what you want: 'what' and 'why'. [...] As a matter of fact, I don't need to care how. It is their option and it their responsibility.

These findings align well with other studies. Wasylyshyn (2003), for example, found in a survey amongst 87 executives that two-thirds of the executives indicated coaching to be successful as signified by a change in their leadership behaviour.

The organisation's comments on leadership behaviour were on a more general level compared to the detailed accounts of the participants, but aligned well. They had seen more visionary and adaptive high potential leaders after the coaching programme, as mentioned by Chris: "*They have a vision of how they want to lead. You see that they are more flexible, more people-oriented and can use different styles*".

3. Managing stakeholders

The third subtheme related to outcomes was that of managing stakeholders. Participants mentioned their experience of 'being sandwiched' between superiors and team members, an experience that is described in other studies as well (Tansley and Tietze, 2013). Through coaching they learned to better deal with their superiors. For Brook this was about constructively engaging in conflict with the more powerful people in the organisation: "*It is about challenging the status quo [...] in a way that there are constructive outcomes*".

Other participants talked about stakeholders in a broader sense, that of all people around them. They had become more aware of other people's behaviour and non-verbal communication, which made them more conscious of what was happening around them and across the organisation. The organisation similarly felt that participants had become more

involved and opinionated. Julian saw greater involvement in the sense that “*they have the ability to connect things in a better way – to see the broader picture of the company*”.

Comparison of perspectives

Comparing the organisation’s accounts with the participants’ accounts, it can be noticed that the emerging themes did not strongly differ. To conceptualise the different perspectives on coaching of the organisation and the participants, a framework of proximal and distal outcomes (Joo, 2005) proved to be useful. Proximal outcomes refer to the immediate results of coaching, such as enhanced self-awareness or behavioural change. Distal outcomes are viewed as ultimate purpose of coaching, reflecting individual and/or organisational success (Bozer *et al.*, 2013).

The organisation and the participants differently prioritised outcomes. Participants seem to have mostly valued different proximal learnings as enhanced self-awareness, increased leadership and interpersonal skills, which eventually enabled them to become more effective leaders and to make or contemplate a career move (distal outcomes). De Haan *et al.* (2010) similarly found that participants predominantly mention proximal outcomes, such as personal realisations and understanding of self. For the organisation distal outcomes, particularly that of cross-sectional career moves, were of high importance, where other, more proximal, outcomes were seen as a prerequisite or derivative of that. This is in line with other studies that found that proximal outcomes, such as enhanced self-awareness could be a means for reaching personal growth, individual success or organisational effectiveness (Joo, 2005, Bozer *et al.*, 2013)

Despite a different emphasis, both organisation and participants mentioned both proximal and distal outcomes. Moreover, the organisation was aiming for distal outcomes as promotions and career moves rather than for outcomes that directly contributed to the organisation’s performance, such as ROI-measures (de Meuse *et al.*, 2009). This mutual focus on similar proximal and distal outcomes facilitated an alignment of the participants’ and the organisation’s perspectives. In other coaching programmes, however, a larger discrepancy in perspective between clients and their organisations is often observed (Ely *et al.*, 2010, De Haan and Niess, 2015) Blackman *et al.* (2016), for example, found that clients valued more holistic personal goals, which were not captured in the organisation’s measurements of coaching effectiveness, such as ROI and productivity. Thunnissen *et al.* (2013b) shows a comparable incongruence of perspectives of sponsor and client in talent management literature. They observed organisations to predominantly focus on economic goals (e.g. organisational performance), whereas the employee equally focussed on economic (financial rewards or job security) and non-economic (e.g. challenging work) goals. They therefore argue that adding other perspectives than the organisational helps to optimise talent management programmes. Along those lines, aiming for alignment of participants’ and the organisation’s perspectives, which in this case meant focussing on a combination of proximal and distal outcomes, may be what constitutes success in high potential coaching programmes. It would allow for both personal and professional development through which organisational performance can be enhanced (Grant, 2017).

Success factors

As all interviewed participants experienced their coaching as positive, they were further prompted to comment on what contributed to the success of coaching. Four key success factors could be assimilated: 1. Opening up to coaching, 2. Getting to the core, 3. Facilitating discipline and 4. Embedding in their context. As organisational representatives were not actually present during the coaching their perspective has only been added to the first two factors, where the organisation mentioned high-level success factors.

Opening up to coaching

As stated before, most participants were not ready to be coached. They were somewhat sceptical towards coaching as it was part of a development programme and participation was not voluntary. Eventually, all interviewed participants opened up. Triggers for opening up, however, varied. For some the perception that coaching was a personal development opportunity rather than a remedial intervention was very important. The exemplary role of higher management, who had been undergoing coaching previously, also added to this perception. Finley nicely illustrated: *“This is not because something is wrong with me, but it’s because they want to support me in my development. So that is a different starting point”*.

The exemplary role that senior management had given in this organisation helped to change the stigma of coaching, which seems to be more present still in non-English speaking western cultures compared to English speaking regions (Riddle and Pothier, 2011). The positive influence of management support and their exemplary behaviour is in accordance with comparable findings of other studies (Rekalde *et al.*, 2015; Baron and Morin, 2009).

A second trigger for opening up was the successful and trustful relationship with the coach. The coach’s credibility, expertise and empathy and authenticity were experienced as most important conditions in forming successful relationships. Credibility was expressed in terms of professional experience and background of the coach. Sam, for example, valued the coach’s business experience and therefore felt the coach really understood the challenges:

I think, first, she shared her understanding about my situation and about my struggle. That is maybe sympathy. That sympathy, that understanding started to build up trust. Without telling me what to do.

Expertise was expressed as cognitive ability, as Toby said: *“he was asking the right questions at the right moment”*. Empathy and authenticity were often related to the experienced chemistry with the coach, as Brook illustrated with: *“I think it is all about the coach. It was just some click or chemistry – something you can’t touch”*.

Trust in the relationship was an essential trigger for many participants to confide in the coach and subsequently open up. Comparable to the coach’s empathy in this study, Rose (2015) found that connection and rapport were a necessary condition for the success of a coaching relationship. Other studies further explored how a successful relationship impacts coaching effectiveness (Boyce *et al.*, 2010; Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011; Rekalde *et al.*, 2015). In this study, however, most participants predominantly acknowledged the coach-client relationship as moderator for client readiness rather than increasing coaching effectiveness. This might be explained by most participants’ lack of experience with coaching. Once the connection with the coach was made, they then took this relationship for granted.

A third trigger to open up was the confrontation with one’s behaviour and one’s impact on others. In several role-plays during the group coaching, participants were filmed ‘in action’. When discussing the video in the group, every participant’s behaviour was discussed. Charlie reflected:

It became a lot clearer to me that I also had a few issues to deal with. I was maybe too happy with myself, before someone showed me ‘me’.

In line with this third trigger, the organisation believed that a participant’s intrinsic motivation was fundamental to coaching success. They did not believe that *“pushing [coaching] on someone was going to be helpful. There needs to be a certain own drive to change”*. Anticipating a sceptical outlook from participants for coaching, the organisation encouraged

different coaching forms, such as group coaching with role-plays that would help to create a need to learn.

In these role-play exercises experiential learning (Dewey, 1910; Kolb, 1984) was a key element. Experience and reflection on experience were essential components in the participants' learning process. Cox (2013) similarly applies the concepts of experiential learning to coaching. She maintains the importance of facilitating clients to make meaning of their experience, which helps them to shift the experience into consciousness, facilitating subsequent reflection. Participants in this study deepened their understanding of their experience and behaviour together with their coach, which for many individuals resulted in an intrinsic motivation to learn.

In this study, three aspects specifically triggered participants to open up to coaching: perceiving coaching as personal development opportunity, experiencing trust in the relationship with the coach and creating a need to learn. Although client readiness has been recognised as crucial (Bachkirova, 2011), very little information can be found in coaching literature on how it can be increased. This may be explained by the fact that most clients participate voluntarily in coaching (Blackman *et al.*, 2016). One of the exceptional studies on client readiness is Kretzschmar's (2010) grounded theory research that resulted in a multi-layered model of several enabling and hindering factors affecting a client's readiness. A number of factors she describes overlap with this study's findings, such as feeling safe in the relationship and readiness and commitment to change. More research on factors that may help participants prepare for coaching, however, is needed, as client readiness seems crucial for coaching effectiveness (Passmore and Fillery-Travis, 2011).

Getting to the core

The second factor that made this coaching initiative successful was that many participants felt that their coach helped them to find the 'real' issue. Coaches facilitated them to understand their behaviour and gave them specific feedback. Max, for example, valued the exploration of his behaviour: "*So she really did not stop asking until I said 'Ok, this is it!'*". Additionally, the challenging questions and the specific feedback that participants received facilitated their insight in their own functioning. Coaches "*spent an effort to go beyond the first impression*" (Toby). He continued:

They could really put their finger on it. [...] It also has to hurt a little bit to sink in. So it really has to stop you in your tracks. Actually, in both cases, the only thing I did was being quiet and thinking 'shit'.

Other studies have shown that feedback is an important element for a successful coaching intervention, such as those of Thach (2002) and Rekalde *et al.* (2015). The latter authors found that feedback and evaluations of the coach were positively impacting the success of the intervention. The participants valued being challenged is a finding, which also aligns with other studies, such as those of Salomaa's (2015), who found that a coach's challenging behaviour impacted coaching success for expatriate clients.

Facilitating discipline

The third factor contributing to the success of coaching was how it was perceived to facilitate a participant's discipline to achieve his goals. The continuity and the duration of the coaching intervention were crucial in this. As several coaching meetings were scheduled in the agenda, some participants felt they "*could not escape*" (Max). Charlie also commented that the repetitiveness of the coaching "*added to his accountability*". This stimulated their engagement and helped them to progress. Additionally, the duration of the coaching was experienced as allowing enough time for real change, as Max indicated:

You need to make a click in your head and that takes half a year, I think. And then you understand it and then it improves. But if you do it faster than one year, I don't think it will have this kind of outcome.

On the relationship between duration of coaching and its success, findings of (review) studies vary. Some found that the duration of coaching is not related to coaching effectiveness (Theeboom *et al.*, 2014, Jones *et al.*, 2016). Others found the number of interventions and the duration to be related to an increase in self-efficacy of participants post-coaching (Baron and Morin, 2010). It can be argued, however, that exploring optimal longevity of a (high potential) coaching programme is rather difficult, as it may depend on many variables such as the nature of the client's goals and its context.

Embedding in their context

The fourth and last success factor was how the coaching was embedded in the context of the workplace. Line managers were explicitly involved in the programme, which according to Lake was of mutual value. It helped him *"to see the bigger picture of the organisation"* and at the same time *"his context had gotten to know him better"*. In addition, coaches spent an effort to understand the specific business context of the participants. Their presence at the assessment centre and their regular contact with HR and line managers was very much appreciated, as illustrated by Lake: *"They see me acting in the bigger picture, also with the team, and that helps to reflect back again on myself"*.

Other studies confirm the importance of relating coaching to the business context (Cox *et al.*, 2014; Boyce *et al.*, 2010). The latter authors, for example, found that the coach's ability to understand the client's business environment and issues, generated trust in the relationship and positively affected coaching outcomes.

Conclusion

This study furthers the understanding of the value of coaching in a talent management context. It focussed on understanding how high potentials value coaching, including factors that are perceived to contribute to coaching success. It explored if and how participants' experiences align with the organisation's perspective. Increasing this understanding is crucial for organisations when designing programmes to develop and retain their high potentials. Furthermore, this study furthers the limited empirical evidence-base of coaching in a talent management context.

Although for many participants individual coaching was a mandatory part of the talent development programme, they, eventually, all opened up. Findings suggest that client readiness, a crucial factor for the success of coaching (Bachkirova, 2011), can be influenced by the coach (through the relationship), the organisation (emphasizing the developmental nature of coaching) and the set-up of the coaching programme (visualisation of behaviour and its impact). Through their vision of coaching and the design of the programme, the organisation thus influenced the participants' readiness for coaching. Something that may be added to the organisation's arsenal is assessing client's readiness prior to coaching (Ratiu and Baban, 2012). As development and personal growth require energy and can have strong countervailing forces (Kegan, 2000), the timing of coaching is essential (Kretzschmar, 2010) and may relate to its impact (Rose, 2015).

In terms of value, all interviewed participants had a positive experience of coaching. For many participants coaching resulted in an enhanced self-image, which facilitated them to become more effective leaders. Similarly, the organisation was positive, valuing enhanced self-awareness and the career moves high potentials made throughout the organisation. In valuing a combination of proximal and distal outcomes, which not necessarily contributed to



the organisation's overall performance, the organisation took a holistic approach to coaching and its outcomes. Thereby it aligned with its high potential employees, which clearly contributed to the success of this initiative.

Other success factors either dealt with how participants opened up and gained new insights through coaching or corresponded to how coaching added to sustained learning, facilitating their accountability and embedding it in their business context. These success factors, together with aligning perspectives of participants and the organisation, may be worthwhile to consider when setting up talent or leadership development programmes.

Organisations could further benefit from the method described to study the added value of coaching. When implementing talent or leadership development programmes of which coaching is a part, however assessing its added value is challenging. A qualitative approach with interviews with different stakeholders has provided insight into how coaching adds value, both for the organisation and its employees.

Limitations and further research

Particular strengths of this study are its set-up, which allows the richly described findings to be attributed to coaching, alongside its in-depth analysis and conceptual interpretation. Limitations can be seen in the lack of coaches' perspectives, the participant selection (on voluntary basis rather than a random selection) and the retrospective character of the study (selective recollection may have influenced the accounts).

This research has brought up numerous questions in need of further investigation in relation to (high potential) coaching:

- More empirical research is needed to expand the evidence base of high potential coaching, including prospective studies, which would allow for a higher number of participants and an evaluative approach of coaching programmes.
- Comparing perspectives of different stakeholders, in relation to the effectiveness of coaching, seems a promising avenue to further explore.
- Comparing and contrasting the alignment of different perspectives on the experience and effectiveness of high potential coaching for different organisations would provide a broader knowledge base.
- Further research on factors influencing client readiness may provide additional insights into success and effectiveness of (non-voluntary) coaching. Factors to consider, for example, may be the timing of high potential coaching interventions, organisational culture and personal cultural aspects.

Given that for many organisations it is an important challenge to attract, develop, and retain their most talented employees, these findings help to make a compelling case for coaching as talent or leadership development tool.

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